A MAP OF
MONTANA
WHEREON IS DEPICTED AND INSCRIBED THE PIONEER HISTORY OF THE LAND OF SHINING MOUNTAINS

A Tabloid History of Montana

Scientists tell a fascinating tale of prehistoric Montana in which these erudite gentlemen toss off millions of years in the nonchalant manner of a Congressman speaking of a billion dollar appropriation. Such figures are just too large for our average five-and-ten minds to grasp.

In the dim and distant past most of Montana's framework was built under water in horizontal layers of sedimentary rocks. Later a portion was lifted and formed the shore line and coastal plain of a shallow marshy arm of the great sea which covered America from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Ocean. The climate was the sort that Florida real estate men brag about. Sashaying through the tropical vegetation were the mean looking reptiles we call dinosaurs. Now fossil hunters find their skeletons sealed in the rocks that formed the prehistoric mud and ooze.

Next Dame Nature developed a gigantic stomach ache in western Montana that caused her erstwhile placid countenance to crease with anguish. The largest wrinkles are the mountain ranges, the troughs between are structural valleys. The corrugations broadened and tapered off across eastern Montana into gently sloping anticlines.

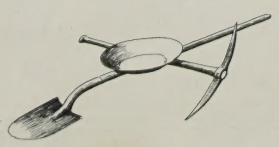
Hell boiled over in the west. Restless molten masses beneath the sedimentaries bulged and fractured them; volcanic ash deluged the valleys, and lava sheets flowed down the mountain sides. Central Montana broke out in a rash. Skin eruptions popped out like measles, and lava cores solidified and left the isolated mountain ranges of that section. The climate changed with the mountain building period and the dinosaurs quit cold. But there followed other warm intervals when monkeys, camels, sabre toothed tigers and miniature three-toed horses romped over the landscape.

Then the continental ice sheet slid down from west of Hudson Bay and covered all of the northern part of the state east of the Rockies. It filled ancient stream beds with rock debris and started the ancient Missouri River cutting new channels. When it receded a mere 30,000 years or so ago it left its tracks in the shape of ridges or moraines. Since then the changes in Montana's surface have been through the less spectacular agencies of erosion.

No one knows when or whence the tribes came to Montana,—probably Asia. There is a hazy tradition of an old North Trail skirting the eastern toe of the front range of the Rockies from northern Canada to Mexico. There are pictographs painted in caves and on rock walls with pigments that have withstood the weathering of centuries. There are "medicine wheels," "buffalo falls" and other evidences of former tribes, concerning whom our present Indians have either no memory or scant tradition. We do know that the immediate ancestors of our plains and mountain tribes roamed and disputed the buffalo range that covered Montana's prairie country. Perhaps the first white man within Montana's present boundaries was Chevalier De La Verendrye, an adventurous Frenchman who came down from Canada. He had picked up stories from the Indians of a great river that ran westward to the sea, so in 1742 he left Fort LaReine, now Portage La Prairie, Manitoba, to find the Columbia River. He probably entered the extreme southeastern corner of Montana and on New Year's Day, 1743, sighted snow capped mountains to the west. They glistened in the sunlight like burnished silver. Verendrye exclaimed, "This is truly the Land of the Shining Mountains." But the Chevalier turned back without reaching those mountains and no more white men came until the Lewis and Clark Expedition, sixty-two years later.

All of Montana east of the Rockies came into possession of the United States in 1804 as part of the Louisiana Purchase. At the instigation of President Thomas Jefferson, Congress authorized an exploratory expedition with instructions to follow the Missouri River to its source, cross the mountains and reach the Pacific coast. Captain Meriwether Lewis and Captain William Clark were chosen as joint commanders of the party which became known as the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The outfit left St. Louis in the spring of 1804 and traveled by boat to the Mandan villages of North Dakota where they wintered. Here they picked up Charbonneau, a French Canadian trapper and trader, to serve as interpreter. Charbonneau didn't prove to be a particularly prize package, but his little Shoshone Indian wife, Sacajawea, played a star role in the success of the journey.

They left the Mandans and entered Montana in the spring of 1805. Towing and poling pirogues upstream was a pretty tedious process. Near the present town of Armstead they met the Shoshone Indians, traded for horses, and cached their canoes. From there they wandered into Idaho and then back into Montana so that it was early fall before they left the Bitterroot Valley, crossing the present western boundary of the state through Lolo Pass. They returned in 1806, divided the party and extended their explorations to include the Maria's River country and the valley of the Yellowstone. It was an egregious history-making trek.



The British fur trade had been an important industry in Canada since the founding of "The Governor and Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson Bay" in 1670. The Americans did little towards developing a fur business until Lewis and Clark brought back reports of beaver streams in our recently acquired western territory. Then it didn't take long for ambitious business men to finance brigades of trappers and send them out to the mountain country. Beaver plews or pelts were in demand. Muskrats weren't masquerading as Hudson seal in those days, and you could wear a fur collar without some tom-cat embarrassing you by recognizing a missing relative. St. Louis became the emporium for the American fur trade of the west. Trade goods were sent out by keel boat, laboriously cordelled and poled up the Missouri River.

The trappers, or mountain men as they were called, blithely roamed the valleys and mountains of Montana, dodging hostile Indians, exploring new territory and gathering gorgeous adventures. They didn't savvy radio beams, beacons and travel bureaus, but they knew their way around. A road map would have bewildered them, but they could draw a chart on buckskin with a piece of burnt stick that would get you places. They found the passes that our highways now use.

The fur days of our west covered the period from 1807 to 1843. Those years are packed with heroic tales and the material from which sagas are made. The advent of the silk hat lowered beaver prices and to this day you are taking chances to wear one in the west. Destructive competition in the American trade had given no thought to conservation. Streams became trapped out and when the Oregon Trail opened as a highway for emigrants, the remnant of the doughty mountain men became guides and hunters for the caravans. This left most of Montana to the Indians and buffalo for awhile.

With the discovery of gold in California the days of '49 attracted a new generation of adventurers. Traffic increased on the Oregon Trail. The prairie schooners depended mainly on ox teams for motive power. The range was soon grazed off along the route. Poorly fed, hard worked steers played out and had to be abandoned. From western Montana a little group of former Hudson Bay men went south to the emigrant trail and began picking up strays. All the worn down cattle needed was rest and a chance to eat. The Montanans trailed small bunches up to the quiet grass valleys of the Beaverhead and Deer Lodge where buffalo had grown fat on the nutritious native grasses for centuries. In a few months the cattle could be taken back to the Oregon Trail and traded to eager pilgrims one for two.

In 1858 there was a backwash of prospectors from the California diggings. A few of these men fortuitously joined the camps of the cattle traders in Western Montana. They heard that a mixed blood Indian named "Benetsee" Finlay had found colors in a tributary of the Clark Fork River. They verified the report and although they didn't find gold in paying quantities there was enough to convince them that western Montana was a good field to prospect.

In time this news reached the outside world. Placer mining had a get-rich-quick aspect that was alluring to yeomen and gentry as well as rogues and reprobates. In July, 1862, John White made Montana's first pay discovery on Grasshopper Creek and the camp of Bannack came into existence. May 26, 1864, Montana became a Territory with Bannack as its capital.

In 1863 the richer ground in Alder Gulch was located. Most of Bannack's population moved to the new camps and in 1865 Bannack yielded the capital laurels to the more virile Virginia City, which in turn passed them on to Helena, a newer camp that grew around the diggings in Last Chance Gulch.

These and other sensational discoveries brought the usual stampedes. Greenhorns and gamblers, merchants and miners, pilgrims and parasites, swarmed in by stage coach, saddle horse and covered wagon. It wasn't long before the lawless were in evidence. Stage coaches were held up, hard working miners were relieved of their dust and nuggets, men were found shot to death. In self-protection the Vigilantes were organized and once started, they did a very thorough job. Trees began bearing strange fruit with a tough rind. A few informal hangings improved

FRONTIER MONTANA PIONEER

A one page history dedicated to the Old Timers.

Legend
Historic data compiled by Bob Fletcher and Irvin Shope - Map and illustrations by Irvin Shope
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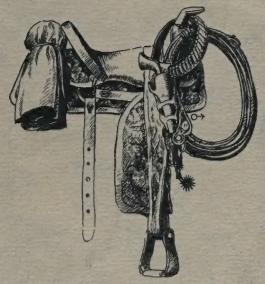
the moral tone considerably. The ringleader of the road agents turned out to be the duly elected sheriff. The Vigilantes stretched him and it proved fatal.

When the poor man's placer digging began to peter out, quartz mining came into favor, and rich leads were found. That type of mining gave some assurance of stability to the camps. The valleys began to settle with stock growers and ranchers who saw a chance to profit by supplying fresh meat and farm products to the mining element. So western Montana became permanently settled while everything east of the mountains was still held by the Indians. Tolerably wild and ferocious Indians, too, not given to supinely bowing to the whim of their white brothers.

John Bozeman and Old Jim Bridger had guided wagon trains across this hostile country from Ft. Laramie, Wyoming, to Virginia City, Montana, in '63. The so-called Bozeman Trail, Bonanza Trail or Bridger Cutoff made an important saving in time and distance for eager emigrants but it harrowed up the feelings of the tribes. The short cut invaded their hunting grounds and violated a treaty that they had been led to believe meant what it said. They devoted a lot of attention to the caravans and to the forts which the army, built for protection of the enterprising argonauts. In fact the Sioux under Chief Red Cloud showered down so many pointed objections from their trusty bows that the Government closed the trail and withdrew the garrisons.



But the Indians were not destined to remain undisturbed for long. Southern cattle had been pushed up the Texas Trail since 1867. The trail dead ended at the Platte, southern boundary of the Indian country. Stockmen cast a longing eye on the buffalo range sweeping away to the north. The cattle men of Western Montana were getting cramped for room, too, and honed to spill their herds down the east slope of the mountains to the plains country. The Northern Pacific Railway wanted to push their railroad west from Bismarck and participate in the prosperity which the cattle business had brought to the Kansas Pacific and Union Pacific farther south.

The Indian hunting grounds were under pressure from three sides, with various branches of the federal government in a peculiar situation. Bound by treaty, they were obligated to protect the Indians from white invasions and likewise protect the whites from forays by the Indians. Finally prospectors slipped into the forbidden precincts of the Black Hills and found gold. That settled it. The more articulate race won the argument and the government undertook the job of confining the Indians to reservations.

Quite a few notable generals had a brisk time doing it, while the Indians got in a few never to be forgotten licks such as the Battle of the Little Big Horn, where Custer went west. Soon after that memorable fracas in '76 the buffalo hunters began clearing the range of bison and the cattle boom of the '80s began. Longhorn cow critters surged up the trail from Texas, western cattle came eastward over the mountain barriers, and "barnyard stock" came from the east by rail to fill the old buffalo range. It was a chance to roll up fortunes. Free grass, small expense and big returns. The country went wild over the beef bonanza with the fever spreading as far as England and canny Scotland. Over expansion, depreciating markets and a few hard winters put a crimp in many a cattle spread. The fittest and most intelligently managed outfits survived.

Starting in 1910 there came another change. One of those sporadic back-to-the-land hurrahs swept the northwest and there was a rush for free land in Montana. Train loads of newcomers rolled in and filed homestead entries on surveyed government land. Others squatted on unsurveyed ground and immediately set up a wail for section corners to be established. They fenced the range and plowed under the native grasses. Montana valleys and benches susceptible to irrigation had been settled long before and no richer lands or finer crops are to be found anywhere, but dryland farming requires a specialized technique. The experiments required to discover this were a trifle painful and long drawn out, but a readjustment is taking place. Natural grazing land is going back to livestock and so-called dry or non-irrigable land is being more carefully selected and cultivated, with the knowledge born of experience.

Montana's mines are still rich in gold, silver, lead and zinc. Her Indians are living on seven reservations. Big cattle and sheep outfits still operate, though off the beaten trail. The mountains, lakes, and streams have not changed much since white men first saw them and primitive areas have been preserved where no roads are allowed. Montana people are hospitable and we offer our recreational areas to our guests as the nation's playground.

This meagre outline which will serve to establish the chronology of the pictorial subjects on the map can be filled in with a wealth of detail. Romance, adventure and sagas more thrilling than fiction have been recorded in many books.

Best of luck to you, and happy days in Montana, the Land of the Shining Mountains.

—BOB FLETCHER.